

MUSIC

# Exodus

BY GREIL MARCUS

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Exodus

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refuse to accept their native land as their true home, whose music, again and again, points them toward the temporally impossible but mystically necessary goal of a return to Africa. As with the overwhelming "Jah Guide" on ex-Wailer Peter Tosh's exciting new album, *Equal Rights*, Marley onstage is ominous, determined, full of barely suppressed violence. At the same time he offers a suggestion of warmth, of unshakable confidence, of an invitation to the audience to follow him on a heroic quest.

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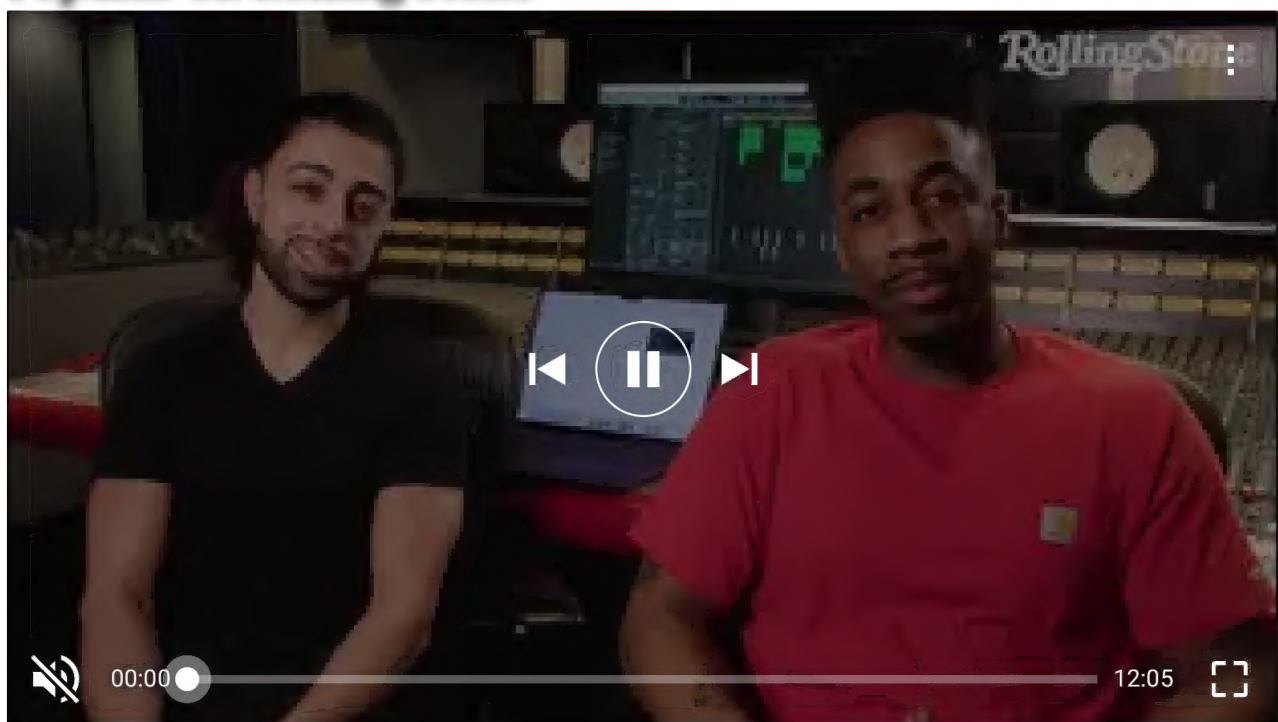
*Exodus* doesn't reach these heights, nor does it seem to aim for them, save on the seven-minute title performance, which sounds like *War* on a slow day and wears out long before it is half over. If I didn't have more faith in Marley I'd think he was trying to go disco — the tune is that mechanical. The four songs on the first side that lead up to "Exodus" — songs of religious politics — are all well made, but within the most narrow limits; the best of them is "Natural Mystic," Marley's "Blowin' in the Wind" (though where Dylan seemed to say the answers were blowing away, Marley is certain they are blowing straight to anyone whose soul is pure enough to receive them). On the second side the album falls apart; the mix of sex songs (on "Jamming," Marley sometimes sounds like an obsequious nightclub singer) and tunes about keeping faith simply do not sustain one's

interest. Marley's performance never reaches out; it seems to collapse inward. There's no sense of the dangerous, secret messages one half heard on earlier albums; on *Exodus* there are no secrets to tell.

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It is very hard to make any sort of more than superficial judgment on a Wailers album until one knows who it is made for — Jamaicans? American whites? Jamaicans in England? whites in England? Africans? — and I don't know. What bothers me is that I have the feeling Marley, likely pressed by his label to continue the search for an American breakthrough without losing his original base in Jamaica and England, does not know either. The complete lack of extremes on *Exodus* — of deep emotion, intensely drawn situations or memorable arrangements and melodies — does not mean Marley is playing it safe, but it does seem to imply some sort of paralysis that must be broken before he can again strike with real power.

Of course, there may be another reason for that lack of extremes: last year, Marley and his band were attacked by hitmen just before they were to play at an election rally for Michael Manley, Jamaica's prime minister. Marley and his wife Rita — she is one of the I Threes, whose singing on *Exodus* is first-rate — were both shot. It is a fact that Marley's music and his religion and his politics, which are hardly separable, could cost him his life. If he has pulled back from that event in his music and in his singing, then it is a withdrawal we are bound to respect; but if it lasts, Marley's would-be assassins will have gotten some of what they came for. Jamaica's most distinctive voice will forfeit its strength. I don't expect that to happen on any permanent basis, but it may be what we are now hearing.

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